

## ON THE NET

### MERLOT: Multimedia Educational Resource for Learning and Online Teaching

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Locating and evaluating online authentic materials of use in the language classroom is a time consuming but essential prelude to integrating Internet technology in the foreign language curriculum. Quality teaching materials that help us integrate this authentic online content are an invaluable resource, but such online lessons are not themselves easy to find. The MERLOT project not only points us to such teaching materials, it also provides peer reviews that help us evaluate them.



#### What is MERLOT?

**MERLOT** stands for Multimedia Educational Resource for Learning and Online Teaching.

MERLOT is a free and open resource designed primarily for faculty and students in higher education. With a continually growing collection of online learning materials, peer reviews and assignments, MERLOT helps faculty enhance instruction. MERLOT is also a community of people who strive to enrich teaching and learning experiences.

This home page statement from the **MERLOT** project explains the essence of this Internet endeavor. MERLOT was created by the California State University-Center for Distributed Learning in 1997. Since that time, the MERLOT project has developed into an international cooperative effort that serves over 1,400 campuses, including more than 350,000 faculty and 8 million students. MERLOT has 23 **institutional partners** working together to support and maintain MERLOT's **Discipline Communities**.

#### Discipline Communities

These Discipline Communities include, but are not limited to, languages. They are focused primarily around academic disciplines (Biology, Business, Chemistry, Engineering, Health Science, History, Information Technology, Mathematics, Music, Physics, Psychology, Teacher Education, and of course World Languages). In addition, there is a community for faculty development (Teaching Well Online) and one for academic technology staff (CATS).

The main goal of MERLOT is to develop and present organized collections of online teaching-learning resources for the various disciplines represented in the communities. These resources are generally online materials that have been submitted as exemplary in their particular field. They are subject to a peer review process that applies **evaluation standards** to the resources in the collection, though not all submissions are, indeed, reviewed.

## Peer Review

The [Peer Review Process](#) is a procedure whereby materials are evaluated for

- Quality of Content
- Potential Effectiveness as a Teaching Learning Tool
- Ease of Use

Faculty evaluators are trained in the review process and have their work validated through inter-rater reliability checks. Two or three reviewers are assigned per site selected for examination. The final reviews may all be posted or may be compiled into one summary review. The author of the materials is provided feedback and given an opportunity to respond to the reviewers comments, if desired. Permission to post the review is also requested of the author. The review rating system is one of one to five stars:

- 1 star - Materials not worth using at all
- 2 stars - Materials do not meet minimal standards but there might be some limited value
- 3 stars - Materials meet or exceed standards but there are some significant concerns
- 4 stars - Materials are very good overall but there are a few minor concerns
- 5 stars - Materials are excellent all around

MERLOT's policy is not to post peer review ratings of 1 or 2 stars. However, User Comments can include ratings from 1-5 stars. Any MERLOT [member](#) and any individual reviewer of the peer review teams can post User Comments if they wish. The site provides an extensive [explanation](#) of the rating system and the rationale for it.

Clearly, individual users should examine all the materials carefully with regard to their own particular curriculum and potential educational use.

## World Languages

The Discipline Community most likely of interest to foreign language educators is entitled World Languages. At this writing, there were 587 submissions to the World Languages community. The collection can be sorted by title, author, rating, date entered, or item type, with the default sort order being by 5 star rated materials first. Languages represented by materials submissions and/or online resources currently include Arabic, Chinese, ESL, French, German, Greek, Hebrew, Italian, Japanese, Latin, LCTLs, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish.

Materials listed in the MERLOT database can be located by keyword search or by browsing through subcategories. For example, "Humanities/World Languages/French/Culture" is just one subcategory found in the World Languages category. A complete [subject index](#) of all subcategories can assist the visitor to MERLOT looking for specific areas of interest.

MERLOT's search engine allows searches of the entire database and also makes it easy to perform a sub-search to narrow the search results farther, zooming in on the desired resources. An advanced sub-search form is a valuable option that makes it very easy to design complex search criteria, even for the database novice. The results for any search done in the site include a link to the advanced sub-search form, facilitating access to the form when needed.

The MERLOT project is always in search of qualified external reviewers for the World Languages Community in order to have sufficient number of content experts to do peer reviews in all of the languages in MERLOT. Faculty who are interested in being considered have to become MERLOT members, submit user comments on some of the sites in their languages, and send in their credentials (CV), which should indicate experience with online learning materials as well as content expertise.

Language teachers who develop high quality online lessons should seriously consider submitting their work to MERLOT for inclusion in the database and for peer review. The usefulness of this wonderful

resource for teachers will continue to grow as we contribute the materials we develop for our students. In addition, peer reviews not only help potential users evaluate a site, they can be an excellent source of feedback as those who develop lessons work on revisions.

### **Joining MERLOT**

Individuals can contribute materials to the MERLOT site but must become [members](#) in order to do so. The membership form requests a name, email, and primary/secondary areas of interest. The idea here is to establish a vehicle for educators to find other colleagues with similar interests in the profession.

The community aspect of MERLOT is its greatest asset. The directors of the MERLOT project feel that they are successful in their mission if community members want to *contribute* resources as well as *use* them. If faculty and other site users submit the learning assignments that they write dealing with objects they find in MERLOT, or if they even just share comments about how they use the sites, they, in turn, feel more invested and more part of the community. They are, consequently, more likely to come back to MERLOT for future use. The end result is that MERLOT is not building just a repository but "a space where there can be real interaction among language professionals, authors and learners," says Laura Franklin (Northern Virginia Community College) who, along with Carla Meskill (SUNY Albany), [co-leads](#) the World Language Discipline Team.